



Bridging our Bubbles

EARS summer school 2021



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EARS summer school

The European Academy on Religion and Society (EARS) is a European network of Departments and Faculties of Theology and Religious Studies. EARS aims to bridge the gap between academia and society, making knowledge available and applicable to a broad audience.

In order to bridge this gap, it is necessary to emerge from our individual bubble. With the aim of exploring the topic of 'Bridging our Bubbles', EARS organised a two-day online summer school in June 2021. Together with a small group of students coming from different disciplines with a background or an interest in religion, we discussed how we can share knowledge with others, and how religion plays a role here. Despite the physical distance between us, we connected with each other through a series of lectures, workshops, and discussions, leading to interesting conclusions on our own bubbles. This report was written based on the guest lectures, workshops, and discussions among the participants during the summer school.

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Theological reflections on bubbles



Part 1: Orthodoxy versus orthopraxy

Based on a lecture by Prof. dr. Matthias Smalbrugge, we discussed orthodoxy versus orthopraxy in groups. A recent example of the tension between orthodoxy and orthopraxy was seen when President Biden discussed his views on abortion. If Biden does not share the conviction that abortion is forbidden, he can no longer be part of the Catholic Church. Bubbles are about convictions and contesting narratives. They are one of the heritages of Christianity. Some narratives are accepted (and therefore true) and others, therefore, are not. Because we want the best narrative, we lose a form of diversity.

Insights from our discussion

“Another important factor in the development of Christianity is the Law. The Law allowed Christianity and thereby allowed contesting narratives/convictions. In some countries, we can still see those influences in the law today.”

“In order to bridge our bubbles, we need to find common ground in the debate between conservatism and progressive thinking.”

“Even though I belong to a certain religious bubble, I feel excluded sometimes. What does that say about my bubble?”

“In my opinion, the real problem is jumping between orthodoxy and orthopraxy in social discussions. Normally, we manoeuvre around orthopraxy (we agree that we are going to do something), and then suddenly, when a sensitive subject arises, people will resort to beliefs and orthodoxy.”

“If you start with orthopraxy, the jump to orthodoxy afterwards is easier.”

Part 2: The science behind ‘us vs them’

Religious differences are not the only thing separating us into bubbles. We have a tendency to form social groups in our day-to-day lives. In [this video](#), neuroendocrinologist Robert Sapolsky, author Dan Shapiro, and others, discuss how this ‘us vs. them’ thinking works and why it is so difficult to be open to different bubbles.

With the video as our foundation, we discussed if participants recognised their own biases and if they are aware of their own categorisation of others. In addition, participants discussed how they personally identify their assumptions and if they ever question them. Finally, we analysed to what extent the COVID-19 situation has enlarged these in-group/out-group biases.

Insights from our discussion

“I inherited some biases from my childhood. Challenging them later on was quite difficult. They were mostly connected to religion and subsequent beliefs. Especially after moving to a big city, which had a completely different culture, I was easily confronted with them.”

“I am quite inadequate in recognising my own biases. In my life, biases are mostly visible in familial relationships.”

“I identify and belong to multiple bubbles.”

“Human relations are very important in challenging our assumptions. Especially the intimate circle around me.”

“In my religious community, people reacted differently to the COVID-pandemic. These differences ranged from singing along in the church to wearing a facemask. It is interesting to deal with people in the same bubble that have different opinions.”

“COVID-19 has enlarged some of our biases. Especially assumptions about who is vaccinated and who is not seem to be a topic in my surroundings. Also, a conceptual hierarchy now exists with some people believing they received ‘better’ vaccines than others.”

“How we are wired is plain truth, but not where the story ends. We have an obligation to open up and be aware of our own biases and how much we need each other for that. And COVID-19 does make that a lot harder.”

Normativity: the narrative behind our bubbles





Our narratives change the way we view certain topics. What is the most convincing narrative when we speak about bridging bubbles? Do we opt for authority, or do we prefer equality?

Insights from our discussion

"Fundamental identities are fundamental ambiguities."

"Do we use the model of authority (one opinion is right) or do we use the model of equality (accepting that people have different opinions)?"

"Some issues within the Catholic Church stem from authority having a central place there. As religion is constantly changing, perhaps the focus should change more towards equality."

"Our identities are always a developing reality."

Bridging personal bubbles





Besides theological reflections, the summer school also provided space for discussing participants' personal experiences with bubbles. They considered their own bubbles, which of these they valued most, and why. They also aimed to define where these bubbles come from and what they say about them as a person. Finally, they discussed what hurdles they face when communicating and sharing knowledge with people from other bubbles, and what strategies exist to tackle this.

While discussing our personal bubbles, the participants were not just scholars talking about normativity and bubbles, but people having a conversation about what they like or dislike, and about their identity. The personal stories about each participant's own bubbles made it easier to see the person behind the opinion later on in the program. It made the students understand that no matter how much we might agree or disagree with each other on different topics, at the end of the day we all can share a laugh talking about simple, everyday matters. That insight was very helpful throughout the program. Nevertheless, people are more complex than you might first think. We are all part of multiple bubbles, which we might or might not be aware of.

Insights from our discussion

"Our bubbles can be dynamic. Together, we can change the norms and values of our bubbles. To be a Catholic woman is not the same as it was in the past. Combining different bubbles can be a challenge, but certainly not impossible."

"As I belong to many bubbles, I do not feel the necessity to connecting them all. The most important thing that connects my bubbles with each other is me."

"My most important bubble is my religious affiliation. This gives me a sense of belonging."

"My confession is my most important bubble, as it transcends my societal bubbles."

"To connect my bubbles, I always try to find common ground. Most people are trying to do the best with the beliefs that they have."

"I do not need to win someone over, but I do believe it is worthwhile to keep communicating."

"Bubbles are our limitations but also our options and opportunities."

Conclusion



With the goal of exploring how their individual bubbles can be bridged, the participants of the EARS summer school engaged in workshops, lectures, and group assignments during the two-day online course. It was discussed how the concept of ‘bubbles’ considers convictions and contesting narratives, illustrated by the participants’ personal anecdotes and insights. Besides the religious differences that can lead to contrasting bubbles, the summer school also focused on other divisions and separations in everyday life. The participants discussed ‘us vs. them’ thinking and reflected on their own biases and assumptions. Many came to the conclusion that they belong to multiple bubbles themselves, and can only question their assumptions with the help of people around them.

The summer school enabled the participants to create a true connection with each other, despite the distance between them and the different bubbles they are a part of. Even though they might not have much in common, together, the participants found many differences can be overcome. Nevertheless, although good communication and finding common ground are key, it is not always possible to bridge all differences. Sometimes, however, bridging your differences might not be the only way to contest narratives. In fact, bubbles do not only pose limitations, but also opportunities to teach each other new perspectives and to foster community building.



Summer school reviews by participants

“The summer school was a great resource to help us understand the complex world of religious and personal identities, and how I fit in.” - Frazer MacDiarmid

“The EARS summer school is an excellent programme. I think the EARS summer school is a good opportunity for those who are interested to broaden their religious, theological, social and cultural analysis, especially in the post-COVID-19 age. I highly recommend the programme.” - Hadje C. Sadje

“I really enjoyed the EARS summer school. What I liked most was discussing such a relevant topic with students and researchers with all sorts of perspectives and backgrounds. They deeply challenged and enriched my own views, which was great. Now I have a lot of material to continue reflecting on. I am looking forward to further editions of the summer school to continue learning and growing in the field!” - Ana Roda Sanchez

“I’m a German person and I can’t speak English very well. I tried my best in the summer school. The summer school was the best experience this year. I’ve learned very much about bridging my bubble/our bubbles. “Your life begins where your comfort zone ends” - and I think my life begins now! :) Thank you all for these great two days!” - Alicia Köll

“A productive two days when you’ve got to meet people from all over the world, discussing relevant subjects concerning religion and society.” - Anonymous

“The EARS summer school was one of the best experiences I had this year. It helped me a lot to better understand the issue of religious and personal identities in our society. Discussing such a relevant topic with people from different parts of the world was really enriching from a viewpoint of the various perspectives that such a topic can cover.” - Maria Inês Nemésio

